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Ann Poochareon Interview

Christina Yang
DePaul University

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Artist: Ann Poochareon

Interviewer: Christina Yang

Internet Voice Interview: Chicago, Illinois, US/Toronto, Canada

Date: February 26, 2010

Time: 10:00 AM (Central Time)

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter quarter 2010 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.

Born in the U.S. in 1978, Ann Poochareon was raised in Thailand and educated in Chicago and New York. Ann received her master's degree from the Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University's Tisch School of the arts (2004). Her works focus on social and artistic aspects of communication media and technology, and have been shown internationally in the U.S., Italy, France, Austria, Japan, Thailand, and South Korea. Ann has produced work in various forms, ranging from websites, videos, interactive installations, gallery exhibits, to stage performances. She has created and been involved in theater performances in both Chicago and New York and has helped organized many artistic events throughout her career.¹

[CY] To start off, can you say something about yourself: where are you from, where you went to school, where you grew up?

[AP] Ok, it's a bit of a long story. I was born in a small town outside of St. Louis, Missouri. My parents were from Thailand and had relocated there in the late 70s. When I was 5, my parents decided to move back to Thailand and so I grew up there. At the age of 15, my aunt and uncle who lived around St. Louis asked if I wanted to go to school in the States and my mom agreed (and I guess I did too). I went to high school in America and then chose DePaul for my undergrad since living in a small town was driving me insane. I graduated from DePaul in 2000 and worked in Chicago for a couple of years. Then there was the first dot com bust, and I decided to go back to graduate school. I applied and got accepted to the Interactive telecommunications Program (ITP) under the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. It's a graduate school with a focus on technology and art. Basically, what we say, is that we do creative applications of technology. Anything from programming to doing multimedia, to making interactive installation, sculptures that move, whatever has to do with computing of some sort, in an art context. It's all technology but a little more creative, a little more, at least to me, interesting. So I was there from 2002 to 2004, and after graduating, one of my professors came up to me and was like, "Hey, you know I have this project and I have to find some students to do this installation in Nice, France. Would you be interested?" I was like "Of course! I'm interested." So me, my then boyfriend and another friend, three of us, went to Nice for a month to do a robot installation. At the end of that project, we connected with some people at Fabbrica, which is a creative research institute run by Benetton, the

clothing company in Italy. Nice and Venice (where Fabrica is, just outside of Venice) were kind of close, so we hopped on a train to go for a visit. That visit secured us a residency at Fabrica and we spent 2005 to end of 2006 (18 months) in Italy. At the end of 2006 I moved back to Thailand because my sister knew someone who was looking for an interactive media consultant for a history museum that they were opening in Bangkok. And so I picked up from Europe and moved to Thailand for a year and half to work on that project. So basically, this whole time, my husband and I have now been working together on creating interactive installation, doing technology work on the creative side of things for a few years. After the museum was opened in Bangkok, we decided to move to Toronto and set up our company here, and this is where I am now. This is now my 3rd year in Toronto. So yeah, it's kind of a long story...

[CY] As an Asian American with so many different identities, because you lived in Thailand and worked in France and Italy, how would you identify yourself?

[AP] I guess I now identify myself as a Thai American. Growing up in small town, Southern Illinois, as a foreigner, was really strange. I was always the "Thai girl". There was no "American" in there. Then I went to DePaul and all of my friends were Filipinos who were from Chicago. There's a huge community of them at DePaul. So everyone was Asian-American. So I shifted to be Asian American. At this point, I have spent more time in America than Thailand. I speak, read, and write Thai, but when I go back there, and I carry a conversation with people, they know that I don't live there. There is a difference in cultural expression that changes over time that because I am not there, I don't catch it. So I would define myself as Thai American. Being in Europe and all that stuff is sort of just a life experience. I guess because I was older (I was in grad school at that point); it just sort of teaches me about the world. Identity at that point had been settled.

[CY] I saw the videos from your Paper Moon project.

[AP] Oh wow! I haven't thought about that project.

[CY] We are doing our focus on Asian American art. So, could you explain a little bit about that?

[AP] That was my thesis project. So a little bit of background: the first year of being out of school in Chicago, I had been in touch with a lot of Asian American artists that was in the scene in Chicago at the time. Back then, there was a performance group called "I was born with two tongues", and that was Anida Ali, Marlon Esguerra, Emily Chang and Dennis Kim. The four of them were really active in the scene. I kind of got to know them and all the other people in the scene and just hung out and they became my peer group. Anida and Emily started an all Asian American women performance group called Mango Tribe, and I became part of that. Mango Tribe's main activity was putting on a theatre production based on Asian American women identities and issues. Because I was the "technical girl", I was put in charge of the being technical director because I was very comfortable with giving orders, doing things with machines. If it was on a computer or sound board, I was pretty comfortable with that. After we had done 2 or 3 big shows, I loved doing theater production because it was crazy intense and you're going nuts just to put the show on for a couple hours. But it was very rewarding in terms of having the audience sitting there. It took almost a year to prepare for the first Mango Tribe show and it was over in, what felt like, a minute. But I really like that

culmination of all your intense work into this short period. It felt like it meant something, and then you can finally move on with your life, like you had opened another door and get onto something else. But in that very short time, the performance time, I really liked that intense energy.

When it came time to do my thesis for NYU, I figured that once I graduate and go into the “real world”, I would probably never get to do my own theater show because after doing it for a couple times, I know that it is incredibly tough and you have to be logistically dedicated to it. My personal focus is just doing creative things with technology, not necessarily just doing theater. So I figured that for my thesis, because it was open, and I could do whatever I wanted, I wanted to do a theater performance - the one last time I had freedom to pull it off.

I teamed up with Emily Chang, who was co-director of Mango Tribe and at the time, she was also graduating from the performance studies program at Tisch. We were going to school in the same building, but for different programs and Tisch actually encouraged interdepartmental collaboration. They wanted people with different skills to do things together. And so our project was a little bit supported by the fact that we were able to ask to use a theater at Tisch. We were able to ask for resources and other things because they like that interdisciplinary type work.

When we were working on the project, we knew we wanted to do a theater piece and then we wanted to do some dance - we wanted to work with one of our friends who was in Mango Tribe - we wanted original music and then we wanted to video. And also because we were ex-Mango Tribe, we were always thinking about Asian American women's identity and issues. But we didn't want to do what we already did for Mango Tribe and we aimed for a more mythical kind of story. It wasn't about activism, but more of a storytelling and experimentation in performance. Somehow, it turned out to be this mythical goddess. I think it was based on a Chinese moon goddess, who lives on the moon because she was barred...I can't even remember! Something or other, but when we read her story, we really liked it. We thought that was amazing because it had that utterly mythical quality to it and she was lonely. Doing a theater with one or two people, the scene has to be just about the character. I guess, at the time, my aesthetics was kind of about the gloomy-typed stuff, misery and melancholy - so that's how it came about. And at the time, our intention was like, do this as our thesis, like exploring how to do this mix of video and dance and theater and whatever, and eventually we'll get around to doing something else. Something bigger. But then life happens, we never got around to doing anything afterwards. So it was really my last theatre performance!

[CY] Is this considered new media art?

[AP] Not anymore. I think new media changes, at least for me; I think that new media's definition has to change every time. I guess when you say new media, old media is like painting or marble sculptures or things that people have been doing since the dawn of time. The same media over and over. Your technique may be different, but it is the same media. What we were doing, I mean, I guess it's not super new but we kind of mixed in the live video component and a bit of camera tracking and stuff to the performance, so it was experimentation. Nowadays, you can find theaters that are doing the stuff that we were trying to do in the year 2004, like live tracking of the dancers and having the dancers' movement affect the video, having the video affecting the lighting and music, etc. So I think that new media kind of manifests itself in the fact that people are always

pushing towards newer things. Using stuff that has never been used before in art, or maybe has, but in a different way. There is a wide variety of example, and I think the definition is a huge, broad spectrum, which could probably be a lecture class in itself, but it is just about making creative work with whatever is new, whatever has never been used to create art in a traditional way before.

[CY] Can you talk a little bit about your company Aesthetec?

[AP] Yeah, as I mentioned before, we started it after...well, we moved to Thailand because someone was looking to hire an interactive designer to help with designing a museum. I was hired as a consultant. And it turns out that when we were telling them, or advising, or helping them design different interaction, it also has to be our responsibility to find the technology to actually make things work. So for example, there's a bunch of TV screens in the museum and what people do is go up and touch the touch sensor, because they don't want to use buttons. So we have to figure out who is making a touch sensor? Where's that? Where do you find that? And there were a lot of games where there's multiple touch, like a huge touch table, with multiple-touch buttons. There was a brush game where there was an interactive brush, so we had to come up with a system that worked. So, in doing the technical consulting and finding the technology, we also double as a production company. We actually founded the company, Aesthetec, in Thailand and just kind of like registered for a name so that we could have our own company identity. We were working on just that one project in the beginning and we didn't really know how to branch out into other projects, other than just asking the people who we were working with.

Well then that project ended and our stay in Thailand, we were just like, we've had enough of this cultural exploration. And my husband actually wanted to move back to Toronto. At that point, we had been around the world for a while, so we were kind of missing the North American scene. I don't know why...And so when we got back to Toronto, my husband Mark got a wonderful job, a part-time teaching job at Ryerson University. He was teaching new media, and I just kicked around a little bit, and we decided that we should continue our company and start it here and then we started talking to people we knew and got a couple of projects in the first year.

We had one client for a year and a half. And just a minimal amount of projects to get by. And so, after working in the back of our living room for 6 or 8 months, we realized we gotta work somewhere else. A lot of my friends work as a freelancer, and a lot of people work from their house, and for me it was kind of driving me mental. It's kind of funny because when you're working for someone else, you're like "I wish I could work from home" but then when you're actually working from home day in and day out you're like "God, I wish I had somewhere to go!" You know, to actually be sort of productive, because you are never productive at home...

So anyways, to make a long story short, we decided to go all out with the company. And because we are both artists, we have really no background in business or anything. The whole time I was in school, I didn't want anything to do with business courses or accounting whatsoever. So we signed up for a business course, where we learned how to write business plans and actually get a loan in order to rent a studio space. [And this is my studio space! It's pretty big. There are like 3 people working here, but it's always just me at any given time.] We got a loan to get a studio space and once we got a studio space and started getting furnitures in here, we were able to present ourselves

as a legitimate company. In the process of getting the whole business plan, we had a business coach who was like, how are people supposed to know you? You have to go out and do a cold-call and introduce yourself, which is something that we never, never think of doing. You know, because you usually just go by connections and the network of people that you know. That had been kind of a learning experience. We actually, 3 or 4 times, went around the city. Well first we did some research, then we went around the city, and introduced ourselves to some companies that never knew us before and because of that now we are working on multiple projects at the time, so it is pretty crazy.

[CY] What are you working on right now?

[AP] One is an ad campaign for the web, kind of an augmented reality application. We were actually doing research on how to do augmented reality applications on mobile phones, and someone looked us up and was like, hey, we need someone to help do this project, so now we are working on that.

We also got selected to be part of a design team for the Calgary Science Museum, that is going to open in 2011. The museum had assembled a team of people, from different bidders, to together to come up with all new exhibits in their new building. We are the interaction and software designer. It's currently in the design phase, so a lot of pilot testing, ideas and notes on paper right now. I guess our website will get updated in the next two years. :)

[CY] I saw one of the pieces that you did with one other person, called "Ku iyashikei net". I really liked that piece. Could you talk a little bit about the meaning of it and how you made it?

[AP] That project was a result of my class in graduate school, and I did it with a friend Yuriko Fujii who is Japanese (hence the Japanese name of the project). The class was called "Networked Objects" and the goal was to make two objects or more communicate over the internet. The concept was up to us. I think I had seen a crying sculpture before that really resonated with me and we kind of went with that concept. We were aiming for something that is innocent looking and has the organic quality that is communicative to everyone, and after a few days of sketching we ended up with a tear drop shape. And we carved a face out it to make it cry. We were also learning about touch sensors, so naturally we thought that it would be awesome if something is crying and you go to pet it or touch it and it stops crying. Taking that concept further, we wanted to explore the communication of feelings that is usually not expressed in words, or rather that words don't have that quality to capture that particular feeling or sensation. Putting all this together, we came up with this system where on one side, if you are sad, and if you are feeling sad, you can go and express yourself, that you are sad, and we came up with a bunch of different variations to that one. In the end, we came up with this sort of water pump that can help you express your sadness. Like pumping out a whole bunch of water, crying a bucket or something of that nature.

Once you pump the water, the signal that you are using the pump is sent over the internet, using a tiny computer to communicate to another installation where there are these hanging sculptures of three teardrops with little faces. They are like your tear surrogate, in a sense. After these surrogate gets a signal that there's someone sad on the other side, the water is pumped into the sculptures

and overflow out of their eye socket, so they start to cry. We used white cement to cast the tear drop shapes, the inside is hollow so that it is a little reservoir and there's a little tube behind it that's connected to the pump. Once the inside area is filled with water, it flows out of the eye, making them cry. Also, as we were casting the cement, we embed some copper mesh inside, which is wired to a sensor so that we can sense when a person touches it. When it receives a touch, the water stops pumping into the reservoir and the tears slowly dries out. Ok, so once the sculpture knows that someone is keeping you company, that someone is touching the teardrops, and, saying it's OK, don't cry - the person on the pumping side gets a signal back and it will shine a warm light and a message using a projector and that's basically the piece.

The main idea behind the piece is that it's a set of interactive sculptures and its communicating the un-expressible feeling of being really extremely sad that you can't put to word. Like I said before, my aesthetics back then was about misery, melancholy, loneliness, sadness and all that. I wasn't super dark or goth or anything, but I somehow was really into that area of expression. So this project's subject came out of that. And my partner Yuriko was also interested in the feelings and ephemeral things that can't be expressed with language, yet universal in all human being.

After the class was done, we developed the project to show it a couple of times. Yuriko being the one flying around with all the stuff. She had to pack all of the parts into her luggage, with the pump and water container, electronics, and everything. What she carried on with her were the KU sculptures (the crying faces), and eventually they were confiscated at Brussels airport because the security guys thought that she could choke people with the wire. They had asked her to cut the wire, but she insist it was necessary (it was, they were the sensor wires). Anyway, we never got it back.

[CY] Wow!

[AP] So the project only exists in documentation now. We've been thinking about remaking it for several years, but I think she is working at a pretty important job in Tokyo. And I'm trying to survive on my own - running our own company just takes a lot of time and energy. It's always in the back of our minds, one day we have to remake this project.

[CY] Well maybe install it in Chicago. I would love to see it.

[AP] The one tricky thing about doing art that I've learned, is that if you have ideas and you have time, you can make it, and that's no problem. But the problem, especially with interactive stuff, is you need people to see it and use it. So you need gallery space. And that is a whole other component. That is what the professional artists have to do. They have to figure out where they are showing the work, figure out who's gonna see it and all that stuff. It's kind of not in my forte. No one taught me that! Like we went to art school but nobody ever put that into perspective - how do you find the gallery to represent your artwork? Submitting to festivals and open calls all the time just gets really tiring. I'm sure it's one of those thing where if you look into it then you can figure out what other people are doing, but I have other things to figure out now so I never really got to that part. But yea, we would love to make it again. Thanks for asking about it!

[CY] Do you think you'll do any installations in the US or anywhere else in the future?

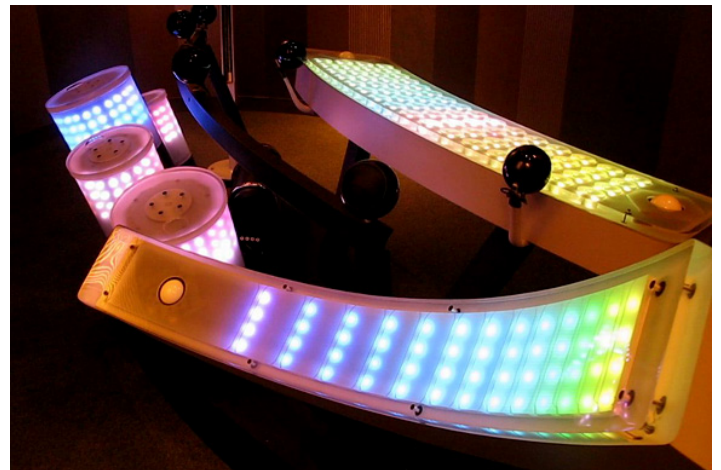
[AP] Probably. I don't know yet. But it's probably not in the art realm, at least not in the near future. Probably in a little while. Right now, my energy is focused on trying to have a company that can sustain itself. Then, the idea is that we would be able to...well the idea has always been that you a commercial project and you make enough money so that you can fund your own art project, and vice versa. Or you do your own project and then someone contacts you to do more commercial projects. It doesn't always work that way so you have to roll with the punches but I don't have any immediate plan of doing art projects at least this year. But hopefully I'll get back into it sometime.

Actually - our company, Aesthetec, just did a permanent installation in the U.S. It's at the Connecticut Science Center and is a large interactive musical sculptures with multi colored LEDs.

a.



b.



c.



- a. NICEBOTS project is a one-month long open studio exhibit, showcasing the construction and design of interactive robots. During the exhibition, the artists transform the gallery space into a working studio where the audience is able to observe and learn how the bots are built and interact with them in their space. Nice, France: 2004.
- b. This permanent exhibit of the Connecticut Science Center features four different types of electronic instruments, each allowing the exploration of sight and sound.
- c. KU: iyashikei-net is an interactive networked installation that allows people to communicate through the interface of tears, a physical output of human emotional expression that has been overlooked, and never made exchangeable with current communication devices.

¹ <http://www.miserychick.net/portfolio/bio.php>

Artist's headshot: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/miserychick/4156464036>

Photo a: <http://nicebots.artgeek.org/>

Photo b: <http://www.aesthetec.net/catalogue.php?CSCM>

Photo c: <http://www.miserychick.net/portfolio/ku/video.html>